

## St. Boniface and the Conversion of Germany

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*St. Boniface Enlightener of Germany*

*The conversion of Germany to Christianity took place in a number of stages. Some of the later ones, in which Charlemagne forcibly baptized whole peoples, were violent. Earlier, however, Anglo-Saxon monks, working in close association with the Patriarchate of Rome, spread Christianity. Among them was St. Boniface (ca. 680-755), from Devon, who played a major part in the conversion of Germany. These three documents illustrate aspects of both the work of conversion and the activism of popes.*

## **Letter of Pope Gregory II to Boniface, 719**

### **Gregory, Servant of the Servants of God, to the Devout Priest Boniface**

Knowing that thou hast from childhood been devoted to sacred letters and that thou hast laboured to reveal to unbelieving people the mystery of faith, . . . - we decree in the name of the indivisible Trinity, through the unshaken authority of Peter, chief of the apostles, whose doctrine it is our charge to teach, and whose holy see is in our keeping, that, since thou seemest to glow with the salvation-bringing fire which our Lord came to send upon the earth, thou shalt hasten to whatsoever tribes are lingering in the error of unbelief, and shalt institute the rites of the kingdom of God... And we desire thee to establish the discipline of the sacraments, according to the observance of our holy apostolic see.

## **Oath of Boniface to the Papacy, 722**

I, Boniface, bishop by the grace of God, promise to you, the blessed Peter, chief of the apostles, and to thy vicar, the blessed Pope Gregory, and to his successors, by the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, the indivisible Trinity, and by this thy most holy body, that, God helping me, I will maintain all the belief and the purity of the holy Catholic faith. I will remain steadfast in the unity of this faith in which the whole salvation of Christians lies, as is established without doubt.

I will in no wise oppose the unity of the one universal Church, no matter who may seek to persuade me. But as I have said, I will maintain my faith, purity, and union with thee and the benefits of thy Church, to whom God has given the power to loose and to bind, and with thy vicar and his successors, in all things. And if it comes to my knowledge that priests have turned from the ancient practices of the holy fathers, I will have no intercourse nor connection with them; but rather, if I can restrain them, I will. If I cannot, I will at once faithfully make known the whole matter to my apostolic lord.

## **Willibald: Life of Boniface**

*Miracles were an important aid in converting people from pagan gods.*

Many of the people of Hesse were converted [by Boniface] to the Catholic [i.e. Orthodox] faith and confirmed by the grace of the spirit, and they received the laying on of hands. But some there were, not yet strong of soul, who refused to accept wholly the teachings of the true faith. Some men sacrificed secretly, some even openly, to trees and springs. Some secretly practiced divining, soothsaying, and incantations, and some openly. But others, who were of sounder mind, cast aside all heathen profanation and did none of these things, and it was with the advice and consent of these men that Boniface sought to fell a tree of great size, at Geismar and called, in the ancient h of the region, the oak of Thor.

The servants of God surrounded the man of God. When he would cut down the tree, behold a great throng of pagans who were there cursed him bitterly among themselves because he was the enemy of their gods. And when he had cut into the trunk a little way, a breeze sent by God stirred overhead, and suddenly, the branchtop of the tree was broken off, and the oak in all its huge bulk fell to the ground. And it was broken into four huge sections without any effort of the brethren who stood by. When the pagans who had cursed did see this, they left off cursing and, believing, blessed God. Then the most holy priest took counsel with the brethren, and he built an oratory from the wood of the tree and dedicated it to the holy apostle Peter.

From James Harvey Robinson, ed., *Readings in European History: Vol. I*: (Boston:: Ginn and co., 1904): "Letter of Gregory II and Oath of Boniface," 105-106, "Willibald's Life of Boniface," pp. 106-107.

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## **St. Boniface Enlightener of Germany (+ June 5, 754 or 755)**

### *Commemorated in the Orthodox Church on June 5*

Our father among the saints Boniface the Apostle of the Germans, was born Winfrid (or, Wynfrith) at Crediton in Devonshire in 672. He was of good family, and it was somewhat against his father's wishes that he devoted himself at an early age to the monastic life. He received his theological training in the Benedictine monasteries of Adescanastre, near Exeter and Nursling between Winchester and Southampton, under the abbot Winbert, taught in the abbey school and at the age of thirty became a priest. He wrote the first Latin grammar produced in England.

In 716, he set out on a missionary expedition to Frisia, intending to convert the Frisians by preaching to them in their own language, his own Anglo-Saxon language being similar to Frisian. Still, his efforts were frustrated by the war then being carried on between Charles Martel and Radbod, king of the Frisians. He returned to Nursling.

Winfrid again set out in 718, visited Rome, and was commissioned in 719 by Pope Gregory II, who gave him his new name of, Boniface. He set out to evangelize in Germany and reorganize the church there. St. Boniface laboured in Hesse, Thuringia, and Frisia for five years. On November 30, 722, he was elevated to bishop of the Germanic territories, which he would bring into the fold of the Christian Church.

In 723, St. Boniface felled the sacred Oak of Thor, which the local pagans had kept as a sacred place near the present-day town of Fritzlar in northern Hesse. With Elijah in mind, St. Boniface called upon Thor to strike him down if he cut his "holy" tree. According to St. Boniface's first biographer, his contemporary Saint Willibald, St. Boniface started to chop the oak down when suddenly a great wind, as if sent by God, blew the ancient oak over. When Thor did not strike him down, the people converted to Christianity. St. Boniface then built a chapel from its wood at the site where today stands the cathedral of Fritzlar. Later he established the first bishopric in Germany north of the old Roman Limes at the Frankish fortified settlement of Büraburg, on a prominent hill facing the town across the Eder River.

The felling of Thor's Oak is commonly regarded as the beginning of German Christianization north and east of the old borders of the Roman Empire. From that point on, St. Boniface's *modus operandi* was to go directly to the pagans' sacred places and first strike them down. Many people actually credit St. Boniface with the invention of the Christmas tree. St. Boniface chopped down

the Oak of Thor, and a fir tree growing in the roots of the Oak was claimed by the saint as a new symbol. "This humble tree's wood is used to build your homes: let Christ be at the centre of your households. Its leaves remain evergreen in the darkest days: let Christ be your constant light. Its boughs reach out to embrace, and its top points to heaven: let Christ be your Comfort and Guide".

In 732, he travelled again to Rome to report, and Gregory II conferred upon him the pallium as archbishop with jurisdiction over Germany. St. Boniface again set out for what is now Germany baptized thousands and dealt with the problems of many other Christians who had fallen out of contact with the regular hierarchy of the Catholic church. During his third visit to Rome in 737-38, he was made papal legate for Germany. In 745, he was granted Mainz as metropolitan see.

After his third trip to Rome, St. Boniface went to Bavaria and founded the bishoprics of Salzburg, Regensburg, Freising, and Passau there. In 742, one of his disciples, Sturm (also known as Sturmi or Sturmius), founded the abbey of Fulda not too far from Boniface's earlier missionary outpost at Fritzlar. Although Sturm was the founding abbot of Fulda, St. Boniface was very involved in the foundation. Carloman, the son of Charles Martel, signed the initial grant for the abbey.

The support of the Frankish Mayors of the Palace (maior domos) and later the early Pippinid and Carolingian rulers was important to St. Boniface's program of forcible conversion. The Christian Frankish leaders desired to defeat their rival power, the Heathen Saxons, and take the Saxon lands for their growing empire. St. Boniface's destruction of the indigenous Germanic faith and holy sites was an important part of the Frankish campaign.

St. Boniface balanced this support and attempted to maintain some independence, however, by attaining the support of the papacy and the Agilolfing rulers of Bavaria. He implanted the dioceses of Büraburg, Würzburg and Erfurt in Frankish, Hessian and Thuringian territory. He also organized provincial synods in the Frankish Church and maintained a sometimes turbulent relationship with the king of the Franks, Pepin, whom he may have crowned at Soissons in 751. By appointing his own followers as bishops, he was able to retain some independence from the Carolingian rulers, who most likely were content to give him leeway as long as Christianity was imposed on the Saxons and other heathen folk by whatever means.



He had never relinquished his hope of converting the Frisians, and in 754, he set out with a small retinue for Frisia. He baptized a great number and summoned a general meeting for confirmation at a place not far from Dokkum, between Franeker and Groningen. Instead of his converts, however, a group of armed inhabitants appeared and slew the aged archbishop. His remains were eventually buried in the abbey of Fulda.

